



A WORLD THAT IS POWERLESS TO BE BORN: IRIS MURDOCH'S POST-CHRISTIAN DILEMMA

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ABSTRACT

Iris Murdoch's novels, constantly confront with the central dilemma of European civilization in the modern era, the loss of Christian faith on which it was built and from which it constantly struggles to escape. She refuses to be dogmatic, but her novels are haunted by a sense of loss of a sustaining faith and the need to recapture what is lost. The novels display the author's profound knowledge of Christian doctrines, as well as its intellectual and spiritual traditions. Writing at the time when the 'grand narratives' of the past are declared dead, Murdoch cannot escape the reality of evil and its irrationality that manifested itself in the rise and fall of political dogmas and the devastations they brought in their wake. European thinking today finds itself at the crossroads of the 'post Christian' era. This era covers the modernist and post-modernist period. Murdoch is a representative of that era. She tries to evolve a 'religion without God' and a moral system that is based not on Christianity but on the idea of the 'goodness' developed out of classical Greek metaphysics. She feels the need to re-establish certain lost concepts and in her fiction engages in a search for morality and sustaining religious values. This takes her to the world of Eastern religions and Platonism. At the same time she is haunted by the imagery, doctrines and rituals of Western Christianity. This makes her a uniquely interesting writer who is constantly wrestling with the problems of a post-Christian age.

KEYWORDS: Dilemma of European civilization, post-Christian condition, Cartesianism, Kantianism, eclectic religiosity.

T. S. Eliot, commenting on the current condition of western civilization, wrote in his "Thoughts after Lambeth:"

The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail, but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse, meanwhile redeeming the time, so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us, to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the World from suicide. (Eliot, 1950)

When we examine Iris Murdoch's novels and her pronouncements on religion, we are reminded of what Eliot said. Her novels, constantly confront us with the central dilemma of European civilization in the modern era; the loss of Christian faith on which it was built and from which it constantly struggles to escape. The resultant conflicts are dramatized not only through religious characters but also through the lives of lay people. Central to her concerns is the vision of evil that she embodies in many novels. She refuses to be dogmatic in any way, but her novels are haunted by a sense of loss of a sustaining faith and the need to somehow recapture what is lost, without surrendering to the traditional religion. The novels also display the author's profound knowledge of Christian doctrines, as well as its intellectual and spiritual traditions.

Writing at the time when the 'grand narratives' of the past are declared dead, Murdoch cannot escape the reality of evil and its irrationality that manifested itself in the rise and fall of political dogmas and the devastations that they brought in their wake. She dramatizes this in a number of ways in her novels. For example, in *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983) she presents the middle-aged George McCaffrey who attempts to kill his wife by pushing her car into a canal. A similar opening is there in *The Good Apprentice* (1985) where Edward Baltram feeds a hallucinogenic drug in a sandwich to his unsuspecting friend. While the friend sleeps, Edward slips out to visit a young woman in a neighboring apartment. He makes love to her and returns to his apartment in little more than half an hour, only to discover that his hallucinating friend has leaped to his death through an open window. Such dramatic openings apart from their arresting melodrama are Murdoch's way of presenting the irrationality of evil that invades the lives of everyone. To her human beings are "benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy" (Hibbs, 2003).

In her well-known study of Iris Murdoch, Cheryl Bove looks at Murdoch's novels as non-didactic, concerned more with the presentation of human relationships and the solution of fictional problems of plot and theme than with social criticism or philosophical musing. But this is only one way of looking at Murdoch's works. In her novels she often appears to deal with philosophy and religion in an oblique manner, without the intrusive author attempting to "sell" a particular idea to the reader. At the same time her concern with religion and morality is very much in evidence everywhere, even from the beginning. In one of her conversations with Brian Magee, Murdoch observes: "The disappearance of a general faith in religion and social hierarchy has affected literature profoundly" (Conradi, 1999)

In her non-fictional works she concerns herself with the problem directly and in her novels she explores the various aspects of this loss of religion with the mind

of a searcher after the truth. Often for Murdoch, religion and philosophical ideas are usable material for fiction in much the same way many moderns used mythology to provide referential frameworks for their narratives of modern life and its conditions of existence. Modern civilization has had problems with religion and has found itself in dilemmas on many occasions. The following comment by Mark C. Taylor provides us an insight into the nature of this dilemma.

Religion is about what is always slipping away. It is, therefore, impossible to grasp what religion is about – unless, perhaps, what we grasp is the impossibility of grasping. Even when we think we have it surrounded, religion eludes us. This strange slipping away is no mere disappearance but a withdrawal that allows appearances to appear. Though never here, what religion is about is not elsewhere. (Taylor, 1999)

However, as he further notes, it is not possible to be dismissive or completely detached from the religious dimension in life or art at any point of time, because "the relation between religion and culture is inevitably a two-way street...the study of religion exposes religious dimensions of ostensibly "secular" culture, which usually remain undetected" (Taylor, 1999).

Even in the 21st century, even as intellectuals and artists speak of religion as passé, the discussions and debates on the subject still continue in a variety of ways. This has received a special emphasis since the 1990s, with literary criticism taking the "ethical turn". Ethical concerns are an inescapable fact of all cultural discourses. Murdoch is one of those writers who have dealt with religion in their works, fiction or non-fiction, perhaps in acknowledgement of the fact that religion is far too imperative a concern to be excluded from philosophy, especially aesthetics. In answer to a question about her personal faith she told her interviewer: "Well, I have the feeling I'm probably one of those Catholic manqués. It's the only religion that really appeals to me emotionally, but I'll be damned if I'm going to..." (de Pue, 2008). Her elliptical response points to the ambivalence in her attitude.

Murdoch's husband and biographer, John Bayley, reports that she was raised in a happy "godless household" (Bayley, 1999). Though they were of the Anglican Church, they did not have any affiliation to any church or religious sect. However, Murdoch had a deep knowledge of Christian theology and scriptures. Her interest in the 'spiritual' was evident from her student days at Oxford. It is to be noted that this was fostered by her study of philosophy, particularly Platonic philosophy. Peter Conradi portrays Murdoch as one open to and interested in all ideas, in anything and everything, in anyone and in everyone. Conradi also tells us that in the 1940s her interest in Buddhism had grown when she started on a project for publishing a work on the Dalai Lama (Conradi, 2012), a project which, however, fell through. She has expressed her interest in Buddhism in many places, but her knowledge of these systems of thought remains dubious. Her religious sympathies seem divided or rather attempts to evade the contradictions involved in issues relating to dogma. She is suspicious of dogma particularly, Christian dogma, as if it limited her sense of freedom. She told Glover "... I feel very close to the Christian Church" (2012). And yet she claims not to believe in a personal God or in the divinity of Christ! Her novels manifest the loss of unified ideals or absolutes in moral or philosophic values so characteristic of the age in which she lived and wrote, creating a poly-vocal texture to her fiction. As Miles

Leeson observes: "...we must always be attuned to the poly-vocal philosophical voices, both her own and her theoretical predecessors which pervade her fiction" (Leeson, 2009).

Conradi notes in his "Holy Fool and Magus" that Murdoch "would have minded the label 'religious novelist' far less than 'philosophical novelist,' and it is to the essentially religious mysteries of good and evil that she applies herself in all her fiction..." (Conradi, 2012). From the very beginning of her writing career, this interest in religion can be noticed. Born in the Anglican Church though not brought up in its religious tradition and spirituality, she flirted with left-wing politics in her student days, but later grew suspicious of its totalitarian ideology and her disillusionment with the Labour Party made her withdraw from the public sphere and concentrate on the individual and human relationships. Here religion seemed to offer the answers she sought to the key questions about human life. In an age that is characterized by the rejection of all 'metanarratives,' Murdoch was constantly engaged in the search for a sustaining vision of life though never quite committing herself completely to any system of belief, like Eliot or Newman. The trajectory of her development reached its climax with her embrace of Platonism in philosophy and declaring herself a 'Buddhist Christian' in terms of religion. David Robjant, in a sustained argument refutes the contentions of certain Murdoch scholars who "claim Murdoch as either a reformist Christian theist, or a sort of Buddhist" (Robjant, 2011), by pointing out that Murdoch's self description could well be interpreted to mean that she was "neither a Christian nor a Buddhist, but a third kind of thinker resembling a Christian on some points and a Buddhist on others" (2011).

Murdoch's concern with religion and related issues should not be understood in the narrow sense of examining a particular religious disposition, it should be related to her attitude to spiritual values and ethical conduct and their significance in the secular world. Going by Murdoch's own declared stance, there is little connection between her philosophical writings and her novels. But such a disclaimer need not discourage us from examining the connections between the two. Even while accepting this claim, it is possible to examine her fiction also in the context of her writings on religious issues. The following observations by Heather Widdows appear relevant in this context.

Murdoch argues that the decline of religion is the most significant feature of the modern age, which has had far-reaching implications for all the concepts which Murdoch is keen to defend: the individual, the inner life, moral experience and spirituality. She discusses the decline of religion and the impact that this has had on these aspects of human life, and then goes on to discuss how religious imagery and tools can aid the moral life. Murdoch claims that religious imagery should be reclaimed, as should spirituality by the secular world. In this vein she advocates demythologizing Christianity to produce a godless religion, which preserves the individual and values without illusory supernatural beliefs. (Widdows, 2005)

The thrust of this paper is a survey of Murdoch's thought in relation to the 'post Christian' condition of Europe, for the postmodern age is also considered a post-Christian age. This is a culture specific topic in the sense that Murdoch's treatment of Christianity and Christian ideas in both her philosophic writings and her novels reflects the dilemma of the Christian civilization that has gone far beyond its basic moorings in religion. Murdoch's various pronouncements on religion and morality point in this direction. The basic dilemma involved is that of a culture that is founded on Christian spirituality and ethics but is in its present state not able to acknowledge or accept it fully. Looking at it historically, it is observable that the seeds of this crisis were sown during the Renaissance and Reformation and that it developed through secular philosophies of the Enlightenment reaching its final stages in the apocalyptic experiences of the twentieth century. Unlike her contemporaries who would throw overboard the notions of Christian faith and morals, even as she partakes of the crisis, Murdoch continues to argue for a moral philosophy grounded on some form of religion although not on Christian premises.

Frank Kermode, in his much discussed work *Sense of an Ending* examines the use of Judeo-Christian narrative of the apocalypse as a recurrent motif in modernist fiction across the western literatures. An awareness of the arguments Kermode presents in this connection will be helpful in setting Murdoch's novels in their historical and cultural context. Kermode observes that this apocalyptic imagination manifests itself in two phases of modernism. Early modernism is what we now call modernism, the second phase of modernism having acquired the name postmodernism. Early modernism was the period of Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Hemingway and the rest who wrote in the background of World War I. These writers saw in the Great War the climax of the decay of the Western world and retreated into a world of ancient myth, or orthodox Christianity or even of paganism as in the case of Hemingway and D.H. Lawrence who flaunted a kind of primitivism. Kermode cites the post-World War II writers such as William Burroughs, Alain Robbe-Grillet (American) and Jean Genet (French), who reject the 'grand narratives' of the previous generation completely to accept and even celebrate the apocalypse. If Eliot and his contemporaries still had a belief in the possibility of a return to Europe's traditional roots, these post-modernists had none. As for Murdoch, she belongs in this generation historically. She too rejects theism and Christianity but paradoxically is engaged in a spiritual quest which is deeply infused with Christian philosophical and mystical traditions, as can be

seen manifest unobtrusively in most of her novels. In this sense, she appears to have one foot in both the early and the late modernists (postmodernists) camps.

Newton, Descartes, Locke, Kant, and a host of other thinkers helped to develop the Enlightenment world-view, laying the foundations of modernity and modernism. Kant is of particular importance to us in this context. Kant gave a practical orientation to the Christian views on God, free will, and immortality. To him these were only useful beliefs justifiable only to the extent that such beliefs could promote moral living. If religion is only a matter of ethics, then there is practically no difference between Christianity and any other religion. The advancement of science with its claim to objectivity reduced Christian metaphysics to dogma and morality to ethics. At the end of the 19th century we notice a shift in the cultural climate of Europe precipitated by a confluence of many factors – Darwinism, materialism, rationalism, empiricism, the new science and the rapid secularization of the West. This crisis, which swept the intellectuals of the period off their feet, finds poignant expression in Arnold's "Dover Beach," which like many other poems of Arnold, is a cry over spiritual spilt milk. Certitudes were gone, confusion and conflict ensued. Thus, in the twentieth century the absolutist ideals of Newtonian physics and the romantic idealism springing from Kant suffered serious setbacks, overturning the world-view proposed by them. This shift culminated in the evolution of what is broadly described as post-modernism. Murdoch's inquiries into religion, art and philosophy are set against this broad framework.

Modern Western writers have responded to the loss of faith in two ways. One is to find a substitute spirituality through art, or philosophical formulations, especially Eastern ones. The other is to return to the old faith characterized by conversion to orthodox Christianity in the form of Catholicism or Anglicanism which is closer to Catholicism than all other reformed forms of Christianity. The first group is exemplified in W. B. Yeats, George Santayana, Jean Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus. The Second group is represented by T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and W. H. Auden, to mention the most prominent among them. Then there were those who were 'fellow travellers', so to speak, of the traditional faith, keenly interested in the philosophical and mystical forms of it but never professing a faith or joining a Church. In the case of Albert Camus it is often pointed out that his rejection of the early philosophical stance of existentialism later gave way to deep affinity towards Catholicism through his interest in St Augustine's thought. A shift towards this is evident in his last, though unfinished, work, *The First Man*. William Golding in his writings often made use of the theological ideas derived from Christianity in exploring the nature of human evil from a determinist premise, not accepting the idea of redemption in the Christian sense. Murdoch appears closer to him in this way. As Bran Nicol has put it:

Like Simone Weil, whom she admired tremendously, Murdoch, though, never took the step of joining the Roman Catholic Church. Nor did she return to the Anglican Communion. Instead, she moved from her initial rejection of the faith of her childhood and her subsequent admiration of Catholicism toward a commitment to religion in general. She rejected the doctrinal and supernatural aspects of Christianity, but she wanted to retain its ritual, mythology, and iconography. (Nicol, 1999)

Even as she studied the scriptures and the theology of the Church, she never quite came to commit herself to it in a formal way, insisting that she was an atheist! Her attempt seemed to be to create a 'secular religion' devoid of the structured practices and authority of a particular church. Nietzsche's ideas seem to cast a long shadow over her. However, 'the death of God' was not the end but the beginning of a new search for a faith without God. This search gets caught in paradoxes and dilemmas that reveal themselves in a variety of ways in all her writings. Certain types of characters and situations involving these motifs recur throughout her fiction.

In her novels, Murdoch frequently presents failed religious figures. This runs parallel to her well-known speculations on religion. In her we see a true representation of the prevailing attitude of 20th century Europe, especially of its intelligentsia. In an oversimplified manner, we may reduce this to the statement 'Christianity has failed, or is irrelevant'. This is an attitude that needs to be critically examined and historically evaluated. Even as the rejection of all 'metanarratives' is being declared and 'celebrated', in post War writing, the metanarratives of Christianity continue to haunt its discourses. In Murdoch's case, this is of utmost importance since she has debated on Christian ideas in many of her novels and also in her philosophical writings, without ever committing herself to Christianity as a 'religion'. Murdoch belongs to that group of Western intelligentsia and its academies that today are characterized by agnosticism, atheism and 'scientific thinking' to such an extent that they find it even embarrassing to be identified with Christianity.

It is true that Christian faith does not hold much fascination for the modern thinkers of prominence. But at the same time these thinkers have grounded themselves on the traditions set by pioneering Christian philosophers and their methods can be traced back to the Scholastics such as Aquinas and Neo-Platonists like Augustine. The weaning away from the belief system of Christianity began with Renaissance humanism evolving into the 'Age of Reason,' which promoted sci-

entific thought, empiricism, and rationalism. In the beginning they did not reject religion, but did open up a process of secularization that later evolved into the present state of affairs. The secular turn did not happen all of a sudden. Nietzsche's 'death of God' was only a culminating point in the evolution. It may be seen as ushering in the age of modernism. European thinking today finds itself at the crossroads of what may be called the 'post Christian' era. The post-Christianity era covers the whole of the modernist and post-modernist period. Iris Murdoch is a representative of that era. In Murdoch's case, unlike in the case of many others, we notice a difference; she disagrees with the fellow-thinkers in the sense that she would not throw religion overboard completely. Instead, she tries to evolve a 'religion without God' and a moral system that is based not on Christianity but on the idea of the 'goodness' developed out of classical Greek metaphysics.

This is precisely the paradox or the dilemma. The question is whether it is possible to evolve a universal system of morality detached from a religious belief or practice as it is. Obviously, Murdoch seems to think so. We need not forget the fact that for all intents and purposes what is generally accepted as moral in the Western culture has been entrenched in and diffused through the Christian faith which held sway over Europe till the Renaissance period. The civilization Murdoch attacks in her writings has its foundations firmly entrenched in Christianity and they make constant references to Christian theology doctrines, and mystical traditions. To understand her works properly, it becomes therefore necessary to examine the philosophical and moral assumptions Christianity is based on. Murdoch's approach to Christianity derives from the rationalist ideas of the Enlightenment which may be said to have been initiated by Descartes. Cartesianism marks an anthropological shift in European thought. Descartes' privileging of the mind marks the end of metaphysics as the basis of thought replacing it with human subjectivity. This is later expanded on by Kant, a philosopher who is dear to Murdoch.

Kant put human subjectivity as the source of the moral law. Kant is generally considered by historians of philosophy to be the most significant contributor to the erosion of Christian faith in the West, though not intentionally: far from it, he was a Christian brought up in the German pietistic tradition. Kant was trying to find a via media between empiricism and rationalism; between the claims of science and the claims of faith resolved in idealism or subjectivism. He promoted the notion of truth as entirely subjective which was tantamount to redefining truth itself as subjective, not objective, and thus made way for self-law or autonomy of truth. This accelerated the expulsion of Christian teleology from European thought. Kant ushered in an age which, emboldened by the new science, exiled the medieval synthesis of faith and reason found in Aquinas and the Schoolmen. Kant proposed to himself the task of "clearing away the pretensions of reason to make room for faith" (qtd. in Kreeft). Such a claim assumes the premise that faith and reason are opposites. In other words, Kant was bringing to its conclusion a process that had begun with Martin Luther. Kantianism cast out the aspect of reason to be replaced by an almost entirely subjective faith, laying stress on intuition or subjective intention which he described as "Categorical imperative". Categorical imperative is the source of human morality. Kant shared with his contemporary thinkers the Rousseauian vision of a society and institutions that made the self-legislation of the free individual into the foundation of legitimate political order.

This vision encouraged an increasing scepticism towards authority; it gave precedence to the individual conscience over the dictates of church and state; and it fed the belief in progress, as the natural condition of humanity when freed from superstitious obedience. (Scruton, 2010)

Kantianism influenced the course of Western thought by casting out the rational basis of religious faith, and replacing it almost entirely with human subjectivity. Thus Kant's formulation of the Categorical Imperative brought about a shift in moral philosophy. The implications of this were not fully understood by his contemporaries. Kant's pietist background influenced him to promote the idea of Christianity as a non-dogmatic religion and he indirectly favoured agnosticism. This in turn brought about the negative connotations that the word 'dogma' today has acquired in European thought. Doubtless, Murdoch also shares this attitude. Her thoughts on religion and philosophy are attempts to build a 'non dogmatic' freewheeling kind of spirituality and ethics. In Kant's view, God, free will, and immortality were only useful to be believed in because if we do, then we will be impelled to live moral lives. In other words, belief is justified by purely practical reasons. Thus Kant, along with Newton, and a host of other thinkers helped to develop the myths of the Enlightenment, and lay the foundations of modernity and modernism. The advancement of science, with its claim to objectivity and analytical approach to truth, reduced Christian metaphysics to 'dogma', and morality to mere 'ethics'. If religion is only a matter of ethics—as the scientific age would claim at best, then there is practically no difference between Christianity and other religions.

However, at the turn of the twentieth century, the Enlightenment ideals, which include scientific absolutism fostered by Newtonian physics, suffered serious setbacks, overturning the world-view proposed by them. Surveying the evolution of British thought down to the twentieth century and noting how "a scientific age with simple, attainable, empirical aims has preferred a more behaviorist philosophy," Murdoch notes that it resulted in a conceptual loss which is serious. She

says:

We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no longer see man against a background of values, or realities, which transcend him. We picture man as a naked will surrounded by an easily comprehended empirical world; for the hard idea of truth we have substituted the facile idea of sincerity (Conradi, 1999).

This conceptual loss and its consequences lie at the bottom of Murdoch's writings. In her novels we see dramatisations of the situation, in much the same way Dostoevsky dramatises the conflicts of Russian culture in his novels. In a very real sense Murdoch's novels play variations on this theme of the general loss of concepts, moral and political. She has peopled her novels with characters who confront the issues consequent on this loss, mostly the search for a substitute for religion, the conflicting claims of reason and morality and the scrutiny of good and evil in the light of the new disposition. Two key ideas form the basis of her religion—goodness and love. Her ideas of goodness and love are derived from the Greeks, particularly Plato and Aristotle.

Magaret L Pachau observes:

The conception of refined love is considered by her to be practically identical with goodness. What Iris Murdoch does propagate very clearly is that good and love should not be identified for one, (because) human love is usually assertive and also because even when the idea of love is purified, the concept still plays very different roles. She explains that "Good is the magnetic centre towards which love naturally moves. False love moves to false good. False love embraces false death." When true good is loved, the quality of love is automatically refined and when the soul is turned towards good the highest part of the soul is enlivened. Love is the "general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and it is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for the good..." This she concurs is the force that joins us to good and joins us to the world through good. She concludes that its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted for excellence and made for the good" (Pachau, 2007).

One point of contact between her theoretical pronouncements and her fictional works is her exploration of the nature of evil in her novels. Like her contemporary, William Golding, Murdoch felt compelled to explore the nature of evil. Rather than adopting a simplistic, traditional approach to 'right and wrong' and dealing out poetic justice to the good and the bad, she depicts her characters as occupying a world characterized by "muddle and contingency". The loss of form and loss of faith are also explainable in terms of 'muddle and contingency'. If the early moderns still referred to a certain possible 'form' for life, Murdoch attempted to create metaphors of formlessness of life in the experiences of the characters who undergo quite unexpected states of experience and in whom evil and goodness are often inseparable. They create or contribute to the muddles. They struggle towards self-imposed ideals and often fail in their quest. Murdoch treats this with a sense of irony and comedy. This brings her fictional world closer to lived reality. In "Against Dryness" Murdoch observes: "It is curious that modern literature, which is so much concerned with violence, contains so few convincing pictures of evil." Murdoch concludes that "this inability to imagine evil is a consequence of the facile dramatic ... and optimistic picture of ourselves with which we work" (Conradi, 1999).

In the light of these remarks we can look at Murdoch's novels as an attempt to study the problem of evil in modern society. Kumkum Bajaj observes:

One very significant method through which Murdoch portrays evil is associated with the disappearance of God, and man taking the place of God. Invariably in Murdoch's novels the young impressionable minds are shown to be rudderless in a God-less universe, without any anchor for the future... These wayward young people herald the Post-Christian failure. They face life without a cultural background or ideological model or expectation. The future for them is bleak as they have neither the effective value system nor the ideological or the cultural traditions to assist them. Neither God nor the world represents any value for them. (Bajaj, 2001)

Murdoch is unable or unwilling to put the traditional Christian God back in place as an answer to the questions of evil and loss of faith in the modern world. At the same time, she frequently calls upon Christian philosophy, mysticism and ethics in order to establish a new form of faith which some critics would characterize as 'Godless theology', 'theological humanism' and so forth. Murdoch notes that "the background to morals is properly some sort of mysticism, if by this is meant a non-dogmatic essentially unformulated faith in the reality of Good" (Conradi, 1999)

The intellectual background to this has already been indicated. Postmodernism implies a rejection of traditional logic, universal claims and essentialist developed by the systematic philosophers and theologians of the past. Essentialist epistemology gives way to phenomenology, limiting human knowledge (of truth) to things as they appear to our perception without substantiality and expressed through fragmental utterances. It is no wonder then that a thinker like Murdoch uses the arguments of a much revered theologian like St Anselm to establish a

new kind of theology that would suit the new world. Murdoch's famous defence of St Anselm holds the key. Anselm's argument for the proof of God's existence was characterized by Kant as 'ontological'. It begins from the *a priori* reasons beginning with a definition of God and arriving at his necessary existence. St Anselm argues in *Proslogion* that God is something than which nothing greater can be imagined. He says: "So that than which a greater cannot be thought exists so truly that it cannot be thought not to exist. And this is you, O Lord our God". Murdoch puts goodness above the idea of God. What then is her concept of God? It is different from the notion of the Christian God, for Murdoch declared herself to be an atheist. But she defended Anselm's ontological argument in her own way, thus confusing her admirers and critics regarding her religious stance. Robjant points out how scholars such as Maria Antonaccio and Peter Byrne ignored certain pronouncements by Murdoch in order to establish that Murdoch was trying to "understand 'God' as the name of a necessary spiritual reality" (Robjant, 2011) in her argument. He cites two passages from her *Metaphysics* and *The Sovereignty of Good* which together clarify her notion of God, not as "any conception of a spiritual reality which saves the concept through a sort of liberal vagueness." To Murdoch "God" is the name of a supernatural person" (ibid) and such a god in this 'traditional sense' does not exist.

Robjant points out that the attempt to defend Anselm's argument is not a self-contradiction on the part of Murdoch because the "reason why Murdoch cares about Anselm is that "given his (Anselm's) response to Gaunilo, Murdoch holds that what Anselm is naming 'God' is nothing other than the Good" (2011). Robjant cites the passage where Murdoch speaks of Anselm's argument that "we recognise and identify goodness and degrees of good, and are thus able to have the idea of a greatest conceivable good. God is taken to be *ab initio* and by definition good; it is moral perfection that we are concerned with, which must be in at the start and cannot be added later (2011). A certain weakness in the argument is also revealed here. Murdoch's notion of humanly achievable or aspired for goodness has to be understood as a Platonic ideal. The other attributes of God, such as "omnipotence and omniscience" are to be "assumed" or "deducible from, his goodness". Robjant rightly points out that "Murdoch does not say how any such deduction might be possible, and never suggests it is possible" (2011). Her argument effectively singles out goodness and pulls "the various notions integrated into the person of God (Goodness and Omnipotence and Omniscience) entirely apart from each other" (2011). Murdoch's purpose is at variance with that of Anselm. Anselm's argument is useful to her only insofar as he is able to speak of Goodness as God. The other mentioned attributes do not stand proven by the argument, although Anselm, the Catholic saint that he is, could not have thought of God merely as 'Goodness' or his idea of Goodness might have implied the other attributes too.

Murdoch spelt out clearly her stand on religion in her famous "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts". Murdoch would not have a personal God and the divinity of Christ, implied by the incarnation, which are vital to the very essence of Christian faith. In this disposition, the Christ of traditional faith can be a good man or a mystical/mythical figure only. In the light of the writings about Christ in the Gospels and the entrenched traditions of universal Christianity, this is mere reductionism. Christ cannot be reduced to the abstract goodness or to a mystical personality. It is clear that Murdoch is adopting a Platonic framework in order to evade the whole question of the historicity and divinity of Christ.

The attitude that develops in this context signifies a return to paganism and pre-Christian philosophies or mystical traditions. And yet there can never be a complete ignorance of or escape from the Christian traditions either. All that she can do is to enter into a dialogue with it, critique it and continue to be haunted by it. In other words, we can say that Murdoch's discussions on Christianity are truly post-modern because hers is an epoch that has lost the basic tenets of the faith from which the sustaining values of the western world are derived. Some sense of the transcendent is needed, but no personal God; some sense of morality is needed but not the sense of a belief system that validated it in the past.

"Philosophy" to her is "both the guide and mirror of its age" ("Against Dryness") and looking at the contemporary state of philosophy, she notices a general loss of concepts, an idea she later continued to elaborate in her "The Idea of Perfection". In both these we notice how she envisions the notions of human personality and human life derived from the Enlightenment and necessarily leading to the inarticulateness in ethics today. In her view it has narrowed down moral concepts to certain vague/general and descriptive concepts.

Hence Murdoch feels the need to re-establish certain lost concepts and in her fiction engages in a search for morality and sustaining religious values. Murdoch's search for such a system takes her to the world of Eastern religions and Platonism. At the same time she is haunted by the imagery, doctrines and rituals of Western Christianity. This makes her a uniquely interesting writer who is constantly wrestling with the problems of a post-Christian age. This meant the denial of a personal God that Christianity professes. Murdoch, for her part is not bothered about this since she herself claimed not to believe in a personal God. She is anxious "that a wholly secular society would no longer actively encourage quiet reflection on abstract matters such as truth, freedom, morality and the nature of goodness and evil" (Rowe and Horner, 2010).

Murdoch's attempt to seek a solution to this dilemma takes her not only to Platon-

ism but also to Eastern religions especially Buddhism, a religion particularly appealing to her because it is not founded on a personal or impersonal God and on many points positioned with her Platonism. Platonism, like Buddhism does not propose a God; the nearest idea of God that it comes to is the concept of *nous* which is not the God of the Judeo Christian beliefs. Further, both Platonism and Buddhism are similar in their attitude towards the attainment of 'goodness' by the effort of human will. Murdoch often spoke of love and the purification of passions of the human soul directed towards the attainment of the supreme reality (goodness) beyond and above the human, which allies her to the Christian notion of love exemplified in the Gospels and Pauline epistles. But it is also difficult to put her down as a Buddhist either, on account of her avowed atheism. Walter Robjant has identified her position correctly. He observes:

Murdoch's love for a world distinct from us might be compatible with some neglected kind of Buddhism, but it contradicts both the Zen of Sekida and the westernised romantic mysticism of Bradley Pearson. For these reasons, neither 'Christian' nor Buddhist' will quite suggest what Murdoch has in mind." Hence she described herself as a 'Buddhist Christian'. However, as Robjant notes: "as a strategy for warding off misappropriation into either theism or the romantic orient, Murdoch's neologism would appear to have failed (Robjant, 2011).

This eclectic religiosity is not surprising. Murdoch has no clear system of religion or spiritual method to offer. Nor is her theology a direct offspring of the Western Catholic or Protestant addressing the crisis of faith from clearly defined Christian premises. Her chief concern is a theology that would retain the Kantian individualism in moral outlook without reference to the teleological vision of the Church, a humanist mutation of it. Her novels recurrently present characters - some of them religious figures and philosophers- caught in the dilemma of the loss of traditional faith and searching for a substitute to the lost faith in a variety of ways- magic, occult, paganism. Felicity in *The Sandcastle*, Bernard Jacoby in *The Philosopher's Pupil*, Marcus Vallar in *The Message to the Planet*, Charles and James Arrowby in *The Sea, The Sea*, Cato Forbes in *Henry and Cato*, Radeechy in *The Nice and the Good* are examples of people with such an attitude.

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